

Scientists At Odds With EPA Over Fracking Study

Katie Valentine, Think Progress News, 1-8-16

In June, the Environmental Protection Agency released a draft report on fracking that concluded the practice has not led to “widespread, systemic impacts” on drinking water. Now, the agency’s own advisory board is taking some issue with those findings.

In a draft peer review report released Thursday, the EPA’s Science Advisory Board (SAB) said that it had concerns regarding the agency’s conclusion in the fracking report. Namely, it found that the EPA failed to “clearly describe the system(s) of interest (e.g., groundwater, surface water) nor the definitions of ‘systemic,’ ‘widespread,’ or ‘impacts.’” In addition, the review board said it was “concerned that this statement does not reflect the uncertainties and data limitations described in the body of the Report associated with such impacts.”

“The statement is ambiguous and requires clarification and additional explanation,” the reviewers stated.

That conclusion — that fracking didn’t lead to widespread impacts on drinking water in the U.S. — created some outcry when the EPA released its draft report on the practice. The report, which didn’t comprehensively look at all U.S. wells and suffered from some gaps in data, did find some examples of fracking-related water pollution in the country. But, the agency said at the time, those were small and isolated enough to prove that, overall, fracking wasn’t creating a major water pollution problem in the country. Environmental groups criticized the lack of data on fracking, however, saying that the oil industry has long refused to release “key data” on fracking impacts.

The review board stated that, though it made sense for the EPA to work towards a national assessment of fracking impacts, “most stresses to surface or ground water resources associated with stages of the [hydraulic fracturing water cycle] are localized.”

“These local-level hydraulic fracturing impacts can be severe, and the draft Assessment Report needs to do a better job of recognizing the importance of local impacts.”

Specifically, the board said, the EPA should look into cases of possible water contamination in Dimock, Pennsylvania, Pavillion, Wyoming, and Parker County, Texas, and include these cases in its final report on fracking.

“Examination of these high-visibility cases is important so that the public can understand the status of investigations in these areas, conclusions associated with the investigations, lessons learned for hydraulic fracturing practice if any, plans for remediation if any, and the degree to which information from these case studies can be extrapolated to other locations,” the review board states in its report.

Research has linked faulty casing and cementing in gas wells to water contamination in both Texas and Pennsylvania, and has linked oil and gas drilling to well water contamination in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The review board recommended that the EPA include more

information on water risks associated with well integrity and well injection problems, as well as from spills.

The EPA told StateImpact that it “will use the comments from the SAB, along with the comments from members of the public, to evaluate how to augment and revise the draft assessment.”

Anti-fracking groups praised the review board’s report.

“There was a clear disconnect between the EPA’s top-line spin – that there was no evidence of ‘widespread, systemic’ impacts on drinking water from fracking – and the content of the actual study, which highlights data limitations, open questions and clear evidence of local and severe impacts, Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch, said in a statement.

“We’re pleased that members of the Science Advisory Board have seen fit to highlight the disconnect and call on the Obama administration to address numerous high-profile cases of fracking contamination inexplicably left out of the study.”